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Barry M. Shapiro, *Traumatic Politics: The Deputies and the King in the Early French Revolution*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009. x + 204 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-271-03542-0.

Review by Alan Williams, Wake Forest University.

If it is the past that gives shape to the present, we know the reverse is also true, that contemporary concerns contribute to forming or reforming the past. While Barry Shapiro gives no hint that life in the United States over the last decade played any part in the making of his most recent book, it is hard not to imagine its central preoccupation intimately linked to shattered skyscrapers crumbling into the streets of New York and thousands of broken lives returning from endless war with what we have all learned to call post-traumatic stress disorder; for it is traumatic stress that Shapiro finds central to the politics of the early Revolution, and it is this traumatic stress, he argues, that explains why men who wanted to forge a durable constitutional monarchy were unable to do so.

The victims of this fateful traumatic stress were the deputies to the Estates General, and it is their experience and behavior from early May of 1789 until the end of February 1790 that Shapiro explores. He divides this experience into two distinct periods and treats each of these in one of the two parts that comprise his book. In part one, the period from May until the middle of July, the deputies move progressively toward their climactic encounter with trauma; in part two, as they confront critical decisions about the future of France, they find themselves responding, not realistically to the actual issues they face, but instead to a trauma-induced internal emotional dynamic that leads them to behave in ways that frustrate their own conscious constitutional and political aspirations.

Traumatic stress and its unconscious emotional consequences, then, as Shapiro sees it, furnish a new way of resolving an old historiographical problem, namely why it happened that a collection of mostly moderate men, interested in reform not revolution, found it impossible to reach any kind of durable constitutional arrangement with the king. This, of course, is some of the same ground covered by Timothy Tackett in *Becoming a Revolutionary*, and Shapiro acknowledges Tackett's contribution to his own work, especially the help it gave him in locating many of the sources on which he relied.<sup>[1]</sup> These include, above all, the letters and journals of something like sixty deputies, all written during at least some portion of the three to four weeks that the deputies were, Shapiro believes, subjected to traumatic stress. Since much of his case that the deputies were traumatized rests on these sources, Shapiro makes explicit two of the assumptions underlying his use of the deputies' letters and journals: first, that the sentiments expressed in them are honest reports of what their authors were feeling; and, second, that these sixty-some-odd men can be taken as representative of what he calls "the patriot mainstream" in a body of close to twelve hundred (p. 14). Granted these two assumptions, he believes there is strong empirical evidence that "a significant portion of the Assembly" experienced trauma during the summer of 1789 (pp. 14-15).

Shapiro begins by introducing us to the concept of psychic trauma. Well-acquainted with recent work on this subject, he tells us that traumatic stress is the normal reaction most people have to emotionally overwhelming events. In many people trauma produces a subsequent emotional dialectic that leads them to vacillate between repression and denial of the traumatic event on the one hand, and a reliving of it, coupled with fear and anger, on the other.

Part one of his work then takes up the task of persuading us that members of the National Assembly did, in fact, face such an emotionally overwhelming situation, one that stretched from their first encounter with armed soldiers who barred the way to their meeting hall on June 20 until July 15, when, following the fall of the Bastille, the king entered the Assembly and announced that he had ordered away the thousands of troops the Crown had been amassing in the region of Paris and Versailles. During this period of more than three weeks, Shapiro argues, the deputies lived with a sense of their own helpless vulnerability and a mounting fear that portions of this gathering armed force would be used against them. For many, this became a life-threatening situation—one of the type of experiences that clinicians say can induce psychic trauma—and the force of it was amplified by how foreign this sort of menace was to law-abiding men like the deputies, men who had learned to see the king and the coercive force he wielded as a source of their security, not a threat to it.

The deputies' attitudes toward the king are important to Shapiro's argument not simply because they help us understand the level of shock these men experienced as potential victims of the king's violence, but also because these attitudes help explain why, after July 15, many of the deputies were inclined to repress memory of the mounting fear and sense of betrayal they had felt with particular acuity in the two weeks before the Bastille fell. Shapiro argues that, for most of the deputies who came to Versailles, the king was an important part of their internal landscapes, someone, who, as a consequence of royalist propaganda, they had come to regard as a "good father," someone they were therefore emotionally invested in continuing to trust (pp. 33-34). And this psychological investment in the king, this "filial" attachment and trust, sets up one pole of what Shapiro calls "the traumatic dialectic," the vacillation between denying the traumatic experience as a way of trying to hold on to the world as it had been, and the inevitable failure of such repression, a failure that brings moments of remembering in the midst of which the deputies' behavior is governed not by trust in the king or by any appreciation of his actual behavior, but by a suspicious "hyper-vigilance." We should note that in offering this assessment of deputy attitudes toward the king, Shapiro, like Timothy Tackett, is arguing against revisionist historians of the Revolution who have seen eighteenth-century discourse and cultural forces as having precluded any relatively peaceful passage from absolute to constitutional monarchy before the Estates General ever assembled.<sup>[2]</sup> For Shapiro, as for Tackett, such a peaceful transformation was possible, and its failure a consequence of contingencies (here the Crown's decision to assemble armed and menacing force) rather than the inevitable outcome of some voyage on steel tracks laid out for human choice and behavior by cultural structures or discursive logic.

In part two of his work, Shapiro traces some of the consequences he believes issued from the traumatic dialectic in which many deputies now found themselves locked. The vacillation one would expect to see in them is most apparent, he thinks, in two particular episodes: the granting of a suspensive veto for the king in September 1789 and the decision two months later to bar deputies from holding ministerial office. While there would be subsequent cycles of this vacillation until at least February 1790, it is his careful treatment of these two matters that take up most of the final part of the book.

Granting the suspensive veto, Shapiro believes, gave the king the capacity to be a real legislative force. Why would the deputies bestow such authority on a man who, many of them

believed, had only recently been on the verge of ordering their deaths? Because they wanted to return to their pre-trauma world and to their old confidence in the king, and thus repressed memories of the trauma they had experienced in late June and early July. This movement to one pole of their traumatic dialectic—denial and repression—then, goes a long way toward helping us understand an important piece of constitutional legislation.

But there would be an inevitable swing in the other direction, back to remembered fear and a vigilant suspicion that had little to do with actual circumstance; and this phase of the dialectical cycle helps explain the legislation of November 7, which denied deputies the right to serve as ministers of the king while retaining their seats in the Assembly. Shapiro believes that the manner in which the deputies were moved to pass this legislation shows signs of a “sudden recollection of the helplessness and terror that royal threats had induced in the recent past” (p. 157). An abrupt intrusion of memory and fear led them, impulsively, to erect a permanent barrier between themselves and the king who had threatened them, a barrier that proved fateful because it was the first manifestation of a recurrent defensiveness toward the king, a defensiveness that “was ultimately hostile to the very idea of workable government” (p. 161). Confined psychologically within the traumatic dialectic, whatever the deputies did to bridge the distance between themselves and the Crown only made it more difficult for them to repress the fear of the king earlier trauma had induced. Since this fear could not be contained indefinitely, it inevitably broke through and led them to repudiate any act or individual that promised ongoing cooperation with the king. With such a pattern operating after the middle of July 1789 and the effects of their trauma lasting up to a year, the best opportunity for building a viable constitutional monarchy was lost; and France was left to drift toward the rapids that lay ahead.

I hope I have done some justice to Shapiro’s careful and informed work. Whether or not readers come away from it having accepted his argument, they are likely to learn much about the Assembly that did so much to refashion France. Still, we must ask what to think about Shapiro’s principal claim, that is, about deriving the fate of a workable constitutional monarchy from the psychological consequences of traumatic stress. For most readers, the answer will probably hinge on whether they accept the premise that these men did, in fact, experience what we today call traumatic stress. Here I enter ground I do not know, but I cannot help having reservations.

First, there is for me the fuzziness of the concept traumatic stress itself. It would seem that a wide range of responses to emotionally overwhelming situations fall within its bounds. While some victims appear unaffected altogether, others apparently experience numbness, or irritability, or anxiety, or confusion, or proclivities to conflict or withdrawal, or the cycle Shapiro describes, or an inability to function in ordinary life. Furthermore, the onset of such symptoms may occur immediately or be delayed; the symptoms may be staggered in their onset and pass quickly or linger for a long time. Why, then, should we believe that, rather than there being a wide variety of symptoms, manifested by different deputies at different times, a majority suffered from the same symptom (the traumatic dialectic) at the same time? And, if we look at the principal symptom Shapiro attributes to a significant number of deputies, this traumatic dialectic, it is not clear to me that all clinicians would consider it a normal and frequent response, especially if it lasts more than a month, as it would appear to in Shapiro’s argument.

Among those experiencing traumatic stress there are apparently different levels of severity designated by different names, but the lines among these levels appear uncertain. One taxonomy, for example, suggests that there is simple traumatic stress, something many people exposed to trauma undergo, then, a step up in severity, a more severe response labeled “acute stress disorder” (ASD), and, finally, the still more severe (and familiar) “post-traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD).<sup>[3]</sup> But, given this taxonomy, the symptom Shapiro describes as common

among the deputies--the trauma dialectic--sounds more like a symptom of ASD than of ordinary traumatic stress; and, from the vantage point of this taxonomy, ASD that lasts longer than a month after the trauma has ended is said to constitute PSTD, which Shapiro does not want to attribute to any significant number of the deputies, because it is a less likely response and because there is not sufficient evidence for it in the sources (p. 7). All of this adds up to wondering whether Shapiro is attributing a symptom to many deputies that would not have been common and that, where it did manifest itself for the duration he suggests, would constitute a form of response--PTSD--that he explicitly doesn't want to claim they manifested.

One might also ask whether the sight of soldiers on June 20, conjoined with the knowledge that more royal troops were gathering in the region and the circulation of rumors that these forces would be used against them were, in fact, sufficient to produce an emotionally overwhelming experience in most deputies, one that would generate traumatic stress, together with the unconscious and recurrent emotional dynamic Shapiro detects. Given their own actual and imaginative experience with menace, readers will have to decide this for themselves; but even Shapiro seems at one point willing to concede--or entertain the possibility of conceding--that the degree of stress the deputies underwent might not have risen to a level that "present-day clinicians would call traumatic" (p. 87).

Finally, there are the issues raised by applying a twentieth-century device for comprehending human behavior to the lives of men living two centuries earlier. Shapiro is aware of these issues and addresses them sensibly (pp. 5-6, n. 8). Still, the difficulties remain. Take, for example, Shapiro's interpretation of the Assembly's behavior on June 27 and July 15, when the King's appearance before it and his conciliatory words produced a strong emotional display (pp. 82, 104-108). This "massive explosion of relief and joy" Shapiro sees as "a marker of the profound degree of stress and anxiety to which the deputies had been subjected" (p. 82). But what then are we to make of the fact that a noble delegate to the Estates General, the marquis de Ferrières, suddenly became overwhelmed by emotion on May 4 as he walked through the streets of Versailles in the opening procession of the Estates General? Overcome, he says, by a feeling of union with all around him, with France, and, perhaps, with God himself, the marquis wept and saw that others around him were undergoing a similar experience.[4]

Here, too, is an instance of emotional expression, joyful in character, strongly felt and displayed, but it clearly is not a marker of someone releasing anxiety and stress. So the example of the marquis causes me to back from too ready an assumption that we can read the meaning of another culture's forms and gradations of emotional display, particularly, when we ascribe to those who inhabit this culture unconscious feelings and motivations of which they are not aware, but we are, and, further, when there are equally plausible explanations for their behavior which respect these other men and women's own sense of what they were doing and what they intended. Rather than the traumatic dialectic at work, why not interpret the deputies' behavior as the result of a transient fear and apprehension, succeeded by *conscious* wariness of the Crown and realistic measures to protect both themselves and their agenda. It may be true that consciousness is not always transparent to itself, but it seems to me we do well to begin by respecting it in others, particularly when we stand at some distance from them.

Despite these reservations about Shapiro's principal claim, I can only conclude by admiring the diligent intelligence of his work and his effort to create productive dialogue between our world and another, an effort that is, of course, the essential labor of the historian.

## NOTES

[1] Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture, 1789-1790* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[2] See among others François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Roger Chartier, *Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), Jeffrey Merrick, *The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).

[3] For the taxonomy I refer to here, see the URL of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies: <http://www.istss.org/AboutTraumaticStress/1490.htm>; for another perspective, see the URL of the American Psychological Society: <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/traumatic-stress.aspx> and <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/disaster-tips.aspx>. All accessed 3/12/2010.

[4] Marquis de Ferrières, *Correspondance inédité* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1932), letter to his wife, May 6, 1789, 43-44.

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